The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE WORK OF LOVE

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This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience — it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not compile statistics of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when Truth prevails. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope: it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.

I Corinthians 13:4-7
J. B. Phillips
Letters to Young Churches

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
John 11:17-27
I Corinthians 13:4-7

"Love is patient; ... kind;
... It bears all things, ..."
I Corinthians 13:4,7 [NRSV]

If you lived one hundred miles southeast of here in the state of Indiana, as I have, you would know that the true significance of this time of year is not the "Ides of March" or the first week of spring, but something Hoosiers know as "March Madness."

Now not everybody shares in or cares about "March Madness," but for basketball fans it is the most wonderful time of the year. We are about three-quarters of the way through the NCAA tournament and by the end of the day today four teams will stand alone. You could, if you wished to, see good collegiate basketball at anytime of day or night these past few weekends. At the same time, the National Basketball Association is entering a serious zone. The preliminaries are over. What happens from here on out has real significance. Even good players are getting tired, hurt, irritable.

And so I sat down last week to read something to put it all in perspective, and I picked up a newly published little volume of social commentary and theological reflection with the title *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*. The author is Phil Jackson, spiritual guru, resident theologian and head coach of the Chicago Bulls.

It is, I believe, a very good book. Jackson tells about his own personal and spiritual journey as a child of Pentecostal ministers who has been spiritually sensitive and theologically alive all his life. Jackson is interested in Zen and Native American religion and today sometimes calls himself a "Zen Christian."

In any event, I was reading and enjoying the book when I encountered this:

> "Compassion is where Zen and Christianity intersect. Though I still have reservations about the more rigid aspects of Christianity, I have always been deeply moved by the fundamental insight that love is a conquering force. In I Corinthians 13 — St. Paul writes: 'If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.'" [p. 51]

Phil Jackson and St. Paul? Faith, hope, love and Dennis Rodman, you ask? Why not?

The words were written originally to address a common, ordinary and very human set of circumstances. A small group of people who wanted to be together and work together weren't doing a very good job of it. In fact, they were having so many petty, silly arguments that the whole enterprise seemed to be coming apart at the seams. St. Paul's sublime and lyrical soliloquy on the subject of love in I Corinthians 13, everybody knows, is shop talk in basic human relations, a how-to-manual for a group of individuals who were arguing so much they didn't have any energy left for the business at hand. It is not, by the way, an unusual predicament for human beings and human institutions to find themselves.

> "Love is patient — kind — not envious or boastful or rude. Love does not insist on its own way."

Phil Jackson writes:

> "I wanted to create a team in which selflessness — not the me-first mentality that had come to dominate professional basketball — was the primary driving force." [p. 63]

Jackson explains his theory of submerging individual egos in the team and individual aspirations in the greater goal of winning games and championships:

> "I found that most of them [his players] resonated with the idea of surrendering to something larger than themselves." [p. 64]

That is the key to becoming a good basketball team, Phil Jackson teaches, and I believe he is not far from the essential meaning of the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

The precipitating problem is fairly mundane. The little Christian community, struggling for survival in the middle of a bustling, busy Greek seaport city around the year 55 A.D. had subdivided into factions, each claiming to have the one and only truth, each exhibiting virtues which each believed defined them as the only one and true Christians. Some were so spiritual they could speak in tongues. Some were so enlightened they could preach and prophesy. Others had given away all they owned to prove their faithfulness. Some claimed Paul himself as their mentor and leader. Others invoked Peter's name. And some said "we belong only to Jesus." Translate that: "we're the only real Christians around here."

Paul's response is to begin by telling them again about a God who loves them so much that God becomes one of them, limited and vulnerable in love, accepting their humanity, sharing their suffering. He tells them about the power and reality of that same love in the midst of their own situation. Without love, he tells them, none of what you are doing matters very much. Your public piety is phony. Your speaking in tongues grates on the ear like a loud cymbal clash. Even your self-sacrifice, if it has no love in it, is an empty gesture.

The word he is using is an unusual word for love — agape — self-giving, self-emptying love that lives for the well-being of others. It is, for Paul, God's love. It is the love that God is.

It is not a philosophic treatise. It isn't even a love poem. St. Paul doesn't waste time trying to define what love is but rather says what loves does. It's not about the nature of love. It's about the work of love.

> Love is patient, kind.
> Love is not jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude.
> Love does not insist on its own way, is not irritable, resentful.
> Love bears, believes, hopes, endures all things.

I've always been fond of the way J. B. Phillips translated the passage in his paraphrase, *Letters to Young Churches*. "Love is not impressed with its own importance — not possessive. Love has good manners."

When we talk and think about love we are inclined to begin with the feeling of love. Paul, and the Bible generally, is not much interested in love as a feeling or an emotion. Rather love is something you do. It is a way of being and acting in the world of complex human relationships. Love, for Paul, is a practical way for a group of people to live together and work together, the Chicago Bulls, the Christian Church in Corinth, the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and whatever group in which you must live and work and have your being, your marriage, your primary relationship, your family, your extended circle of friends.

Marriage: no two people ever married who did not feel love for one another strongly. Or at least not very many. The people I talk to in preparation for their wedding exhibit a deep and passionate love for each other. But a healthy, life-giving marriage — or any committed relationship for that matter — depends to a large degree on how willing two people are to work at the relationship, particularly when they aren't feeling much love. In one way or another, most ministers and counselors try to slip that word into the conversation somehow. It is hard to imagine when they're standing there in the front of the church, looking as beautiful and handsome as brides and grooms look, dressed more elegantly than maybe they ever will be again, surrounded by all the people who love them best, it is admittedly difficult, and not an altogether welcome thought, that there may be a day in the not-too-distant future when one or both of them feels neither loving nor loveable. And that's precisely when love goes to work. Frederick Buechner says it wonderfully:

> "The promises (at the wedding) are not just promises to love the other when the other is lovely and loveable, but to love the other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and that means to love the other even at half-past-three in the morning when the baby is crying, and to love each other with a terrible cold in the head and when the bills have to be paid. The love that is affirmed at a wedding is not just a condition of the heart, but an act of the will, the promise that lovers make is to will the other's good even at the expense of its own good — and that is quite a promise."

Loving children is demanding work. The State Department of Children and Family Services deals with the tragic results of a culture that in many ways has forgotten what it means to love the children: parents who bear children they neither want nor care about; communities so fragmented and dysfunctional that all the human support systems — schools, churches, civic organizations — simply disintegrate, leaving the child solely dependent on the parent who never wanted the child in the first place. It is not easy to love the children and we are not doing a very good job of it as a nation at this moment in time.

Even in the most privileged situations it is not easy to love the children. I will never forget attending a meeting for parents to discuss alcohol and drug use. A very wise psychologist told us, all of us parents of elementary and junior high students that "You have to be willing to be disliked by your children. The trouble with all you well-educated professionals," she went on, "is that you feel guilty about your children. You feel guilty about not spending enough time with them. You analyze every decision you make and you have a very hard time making decisions that will make your children unhappy." It is neither easy nor simple to love the children.

It is not particularly easy to love neighbors or to love one another for that matter. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is having a hard time these days. We're arguing with one another about everything: about money, about authority, about programs and people and who said what about whom and who did what, when and where. We're arguing about what we believe and what it means to be a Christian and what the church ought to be. And we are really arguing about whether or not homosexual persons can be ordained as officers and ministers. And some people who are close to the center of all this arguing are wondering out loud whether there will be anything left of the Presbyterian Church after we get together this summer for our annual assembly. And I wonder if God's patience with us might be wearing a little thin because like the Corinthians we seem to have forgotten that without love — the whole enterprise is a little empty. I'd be fearful in fact, if I didn't believe God's love is infinitely patient and kind and profoundly courteous, that God has good manners.

Love for our neighbors is not very dramatic. It is not love on display, but love quietly but strongly lived.

Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian, tells about a year he spent as part of a L'Arche community in France. L'Arche is a world-wide network of communities for mentally handicapped people. Nouwen tells how each cottage gathers every evening around a table to sing and talk about the day and to pray, and how there is always a candle and flowers on the table, a quietly eloquent word of dignity and love for the residents, their companions and caregivers. "Love," Paul said, "is kind."

The essence of this Christian religion of ours is that God's love is revealed in Jesus Christ in such a way that it invites and demands our response. The response is to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord, which means believing that God's love lived in Jesus of Nazareth. It is to risk accepting that love personally, God's love for me that just might transform me, God's love that died for me, God's love that lives eternally for me. And there it stops for many people: believing in and accepting God's love in Jesus Christ. But Christian religion is about living that love in the world, risking losing our selves for the cause and the work of love. I love the way Douglas John Hall puts that:

> "Jesus saves. He saves us for life, for giving ourselves over to its joys and sorrows, its predictable and unpredictable occurrences, its routines and surprises. He saves us from the awful habit we have of saving ourselves, of sparing our energies, of protecting our minds and souls and bodies from the life struggles ... He saves us for the spend-thriftiness of love." [*Professing the Faith*, p. 553]

It is the nature of that love to give itself away in acts of kindness, in profound courtesy — which is how Dick Selzer, a surgeon, defines love — "profound courtesy." It is a way of being in the world and it is the very essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a love that was given to us in order that we might give it to the world and live it out in the routines and responsibilities and relationships that constitute our daily lives.

This passage, someone noted, is really about God and us. The love Paul describes is the miracle of God's attitude, God's relationship with us. Love, the love God is, the love God gave in Jesus Christ, the love we are called to live, bears all things, St. Paul wrote.

When I read that I think of a couple planning their retirement and working creatively and devotedly and almost incessantly to provide for their youngest child, a young woman, now in her late twenties, with Down syndrome. I think of them trying to find the right living arrangement, with infinite patience, investigating, reading, researching, interviewing until just the right group home with

the most appropriate oversight could be found. I think of them working with public and private agencies to secure meaningful employment, work for pay, appropriate, doable and necessary tasks. And when all this is in place I think of them addressing the matter of transportation, a simple detail for most of us, but for them perhaps the toughest hurdle of all — how she will travel daily, by herself, from her home to her job and back again in the evening. Most of all I think of them, taking turns, following the bus on which she is a passenger, on her way to work, on her own now, out in the world, getting on a bus, finding her seat, taking care of her belongings, watching carefully for the correct bus stop. She is secure, but not aware of how secure she is, because one of her parents is in a car, following the bus discretely, without her being aware of it, all the way from the corner bus stop to her place of employment. I think of them doing that morning and night until they know she can do it on her own.

That's what love is. It is what God's love for us is. Love we have been given. Love we are invited to live and experience and enjoy. Love — patient and kind, love — profoundly courteous. Love that is constructive. Love that is strong. Love with no limit to its endurance. Love that can outlast anything.

Dear God, your love for us is beyond our comprehending. In these days of Lent, as we draw near to the cross, may we see there, again, your love poured out for us; your love inviting us so to love that others will know and believe and follow: even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen